

## 18 How Does the First Testament Look at Other Religions?<sup>1</sup>

What attitude does the First Testament suggest to religious plurality? Different parts of the First Testament suggest a variety of perspectives on this question. Two insights then emerge from the First Testament as a whole. One is that it is possible to recognize foreign religions as reflecting truth about God from which Israel itself may even be able to learn; the other is that nevertheless the First Testament sees these religions as always in need of the illumination that can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel. So the First Testament does not suggest one should take a radically exclusivist attitude to other religions, as if they were simply misguided, simply the fruits of human sin or inspired by demonic spirits. Yet one cannot simply affirm them as if they are just as valid as First Testament faith itself. The closing sections of the paper suggest why this is so. The narrative nature of First Testament faith is key to understanding its attitude to this question. The First Testament is not simply a collection of religious traditions parallel to those of other peoples (though that is one aspect of its significance). In the story of Israel that led to the story of Jesus Christ, God was doing something of decisive importance for the whole world. The First Testament's religious tradition is therefore of unique and decisive importance to all peoples because it is part of the Christian story.

### 1 Perspectives from Creation: Humanity's Awareness of God and Distance from God

Genesis 1 – 11 assumes that human beings are created in God's image and aware of God. Their disobedience and their expulsion from God's garden did not remove the image or the awareness; this is presupposed by their religious observances in act and word (e.g., Gen 4:1, 3, 26). The God they refer to in connection with these observances is identified as Yahweh, though on the usual understanding of Exod 6 this identification is a theological interpretation of their practice rather than an indication of the name for God they would themselves have used. They acknowledge God as creator, giver of blessing, judge, and protector, and respond to God in offering, plea, and proclamation. The chapters imply an understanding of the religious awareness of human beings in general that corresponds to the understanding of the ethical awareness of human beings expressed in Amos 1 – 2, and they imply a universal lordship and involvement of Yahweh among all peoples corresponding to that stated in Amos 9:7.

This understanding also bears comparison with that of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs. These works have particularly clear parallels with others from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Sometimes the relationship with these involves direct dependence, as is the

---

<sup>1</sup> An expansion and revision of a paper written for the Tyndale Fellowship Conference on Religious Pluralism in 1991, itself revised in light of comments by Christopher J. H. Wright as respondent and published under both our names in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter; Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), pp. 34–52; second ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) pp. 43–62.

case with the “Thirty Sayings” in Prov 22 – 24. Sometimes the parallels are matters of theme, form, emphasis, and mode of treatment, which as such apply also to features of proverbial, skeptical, philosophical, dramatic and erotic literature from other times and areas. In either case non-Israelite insight is set in a new context within the religion of Yahweh (cf. Prov 1:7), but the implication of the parallels is that pagan thought has its own insight. The First Testament pictures God’s wisdom involved and reflected in creation (Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-31) and pictures God’s breath infused into human beings by virtue of their creation (e.g., Job 32:8). Both ideas suggest a theological rationale for expecting that the nature of the created world and the experience, thought, culture, and religion of the human creation will reflect something of God’s truth. The Wisdom literature is thus evidence of the ability of Yahwistic faith to incorporate the insights of other cultures, recognizing its value while removing from it idolatrous or polytheistic elements. We might thus reflect on the significance of the Wisdom tradition as a starting point for cross-cultural communication of biblical faith and inter-religious dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

The picture of all humanity as made in God’s image might seem to point in the same direction, though the First Testament itself does not develop this idea. Its not referring back to this motif in Gen 1 (as to other aspects of Gen 1 – 3) can puzzle Christians, for whom these chapters are of key theological significance. Exegetically the meaning of “the image of God” is much disputed.<sup>3</sup> Further, despite the universal form of the expression, originally its point may have been to reassure Israelites of their human significance as much as directly to make a comment on humanity as a whole. So we may say that the First Testament indeed presupposes that all humanity was made by God and has some insight into the significance of human life, but it does not use the idea of being made in God’s image to express the point.

From the time of Noah, human beings in general are seen as in a form of covenant relationship with God (Gen 6:18; 9:8-17; cf. the covenants of Isa 24:5; Amos 1:9?). This Noah covenant undergirds the providential preservation of life on earth. The fundamental idea of “covenant” in Hebrew as in English is that of a formalized commitment in relationship; the commitment may be one-sided or may be more mutual. It would not have raised our eyebrows if the relationship between God and humanity in Gen 1 – 2 had been described as covenantal, and it has often been interpreted as implicitly so. The absence of the actual term “covenant” in Gen 1 – 2 perhaps suggests that a covenanted relationship is by definition one that needs special protection or undergirding because of known pressures on commitment such as the human shortcomings that come to expression in Gen 3 – 6. It is only when sin has become a reality that commitments need to be the subject of a covenant. It is in any case striking that God enters into such a committed relationship with humanity after the Flood on the basis of their shortcomings having clearly emerged (cf. the explicit argument of Gen 8:21).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See John Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom in the Context of World Religions* (London SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See the introduction to chapter 4 above.

<sup>4</sup> TNIV’s “although” obscures this point. On “covenant,” see chapter 9 above.

This is not, however, the kind of special redemptive covenant relationship that Israel later enjoys, with its more explicit committed mutual relationship (which itself turned out to be insufficient to solve the problems unveiled in Gen 1 – 11). The human beings in the covenant relationship initiated with Noah are not readmitted to God's garden, and they tend to resist the fulfillment of their human destiny. Indeed, the events that follow on the covenant-making of Gen 9 underline the moral and religious shortcomings of Noah's descendants and give Gen 1 – 11 as a whole a rather gloomy cast. The chapters are a background to the necessary story of restoration that follows.

Both sides to Gen 1 – 11 have implications for attitudes to the religions of our own day. On one hand the religions reflect humanity's being made in God's image and being in a form of covenant relationship with God. Books such as Proverbs, too, point us towards an attitude to other cultures (of which their religions are part) that looks at them as sources of insight and not merely as expressions of lost-ness. On the other hand, Gen 1 – 11 suggests that the religions, like all human activity, belong in the context of a world that needs restoration to the destiny and the relationship with God that were intended for them, which God purposed to bring about through the covenant with Israel that culminated in the mission and accomplishment of Jesus. Similarly, books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs illustrate the limitations of what can be said on the basis of human experience outside of Yahweh's special involvement with Israel.

The religions can thus be viewed both positively and negatively. They are not inherently demonic or merely sinful human attempts to reach God. We can learn from them. Yet they are not equally valid insights into the truth about God. They may provide a starting point and certain areas of common ground, but not a finishing point. They cannot tell us about the special and vital activity of God in Israel that came to a climax in Christ; and further, all human religion is not only inevitably tainted by our wayward life in this earth, but can be the very means we use to keep at arm's length the God we choose not to obey. Religion can express our rebellion as well as our response. This, of course, is as true for Israelite religion (as the prophets pointed out) and for Christian religion as for any other faith. Religion always has this duality or ambiguity, a simultaneous seeking after God our creator and fleeing from God our judge.

## 2 Perspectives from the Stories of Israel's Ancestors: The Possibility and Limitations of "Ecumenical Bonhomie"<sup>5</sup>

The stories in Gen 12 – 50, following the book's opening exposition of the world's created-ness and turning away from God, speak of special acts and words in relation to Israel's ancestors in connection with a special purpose God has for them. In a sense these later chapters are thus moving from a more inclusive to a more exclusive attitude, but this purpose is one intended to benefit the whole world. Further, the ancestors' words and deeds do not imply the belief that other peoples in Canaan have no knowledge of God, though the ancestors do seem to establish their own

---

<sup>5</sup> G. J. Wenham's phrase in "The Religion of the Patriarchs," in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (ed.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: IVP, 1980/Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), ch. 6.

places of worship, near those of the Canaanites, rather than making use of Canaanite sanctuaries. Like some other peoples in the Middle East, Israel's ancestors enjoy a particular awareness of God as the God of the head of the family, a God who enters into a special relationship with their leader and through him guides them in their lives.

In keeping with Gen 1 - 11, Gen 12 - 50 presupposes that this God is the one whom later Israel worships as Yahweh. It also speak of this God as El, commonly in compound with other expressions in phrases such as El Elyon (El Most High; 14:18-22), El Roi (El Who Sees Me; 16:13), El Shaddai (?El Almighty; 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3), and El Olam (El Eternal; 21:33). Like its equivalent in other Semitic languages, *'il*, Hebrew *'el* can be both a term for deity, like *'elohim* (e.g., Exod 15:2; 20:5), and an actual name for God. It is thus sometimes properly transliterated El, sometimes properly translated "God" or "god."

Its background as a Canaanite name for "the god par excellence, the head of the pantheon"<sup>6</sup> lies near the surface in Gen 14, where Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem blesses Abram in the name of his god, "El Elyon, owner of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:19). Abram in turn takes an oath in the name of "Yahweh, El Elyon, owner of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:22). Apparently Abram and Genesis itself recognize that Melchizedek (and presumably other people in Canaan who worship El under one manifestation or another) serves the true God but does not know all there is to know about that God. It is in keeping with this that Israel in due course takes over Melchizedek's city of Salem and locates Yahweh's own chief sanctuary there. "Yahweh roars from Zion" (Amos 1:2); indeed, "El, God, Yahweh" shines forth from Zion (Ps 50:1). A similar implication emerges from Abraham's calling on God as Yahweh El Olam in Gen 18:33. El Olam appears only here as a designation of Yahweh, but comparable phrases come elsewhere to designate Canaanite deities. Such Canaanite texts also more broadly refer to El as one who blesses, promises offspring, heals, and guides in war, like Yahweh. Joseph and Pharaoh, too, seem to work on the basis that the God they serve is the same God (see Gen 41:16, 39; and compare Pharaoh's giving and Joseph's accepting an Egyptian theophoric name and a wife who was a priest's daughter, 41:45).

So there are a number of correspondences between Yahweh and El as the Canaanites know him, but these correspondences do not constitute identity. They do not indicate that Canaanite and Israelite faith are identical, or equally valid alternatives depending on where you happen to live. From the perspective of the historical development of religions, it might be feasible to see Yahwism as a mutation from Middle-Eastern religion, as Christianity was a mutation from Judaism, but this does not imply that the mutation is of similar status to its parent; rather the opposite. Canaanite religion had its insight and limited validity, but what God began to do with Abram was something of far-reaching significance, even for the Canaanites themselves. The process was not merely syncretistic in a natural development of human religious insights. In dealing with the ancestors of Israel, the living God, later disclosed as Yahweh, made an accommodation to the names and forms of deity then known in their cultural setting. This does

---

<sup>6</sup> F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 13.

not thereby endorse every aspect of Canaanite El worship. The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenantal God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know God as El. The end result of what God began to do through Abram was of significance for the Canaanites precisely because it critiqued and rejected Canaanite religion.

It has been suggested that biblical faith emerged in a context of multiple religious options. That is too Californian a way to put it. People did not think in terms of options and these options were not multiple. Abraham lived in a context of one faith in Babylon and another in Canaan. He was summoned out of the first in order to begin a different narrative. He is then content to live that narrative alongside Canaanites such as Melchizedek who live their own narrative. What to do with the difference between these narratives is God's business.

In the context of pre-modernity, people had one religious option but accepted that other people lived by other narratives. In the context of modernity, people did not allow others to live by different religious options. In the context of post-modernity, everybody has their story.

### 3 Perspectives from Exodus and Sinai: The Distinctive Importance of Yahweh's Acts of Redemption

The distinctive foundation of Israelite faith is that the true God, El Most High, the creator of heaven and earth, Eternal and Almighty, has acted in a specially significant way in relation to Israel. God gives concrete expression to the relationship with and guiding of the particular people whose story Gen 12 – 50 tells, by bringing them out of service to Egypt and into service of Yahweh and renegotiating the covenant with them at Sinai. This God goes on to give them the whole land of Canaan as a secure home. All this happens in fulfillment of specific promises made to their ancestors long before. That gives new content to the understanding of the God they share with the Canaanites, new content anticipated in this God's self-revelation to Moses as Yahweh (even if that name was already known, perhaps even as an epithet of El) and reflected in the centrality of the name Yahweh henceforth. The God of these other religions is now more fully known in Israel, ultimately so that this God may be more fully known among other peoples, too. The creator's victory over Sea (of which Canaanite stories told) has been won in history.<sup>7</sup> El's decrees and judgments are delivered on earth at Sinai.

It is still the God worshiped within these other religions who is more fully known here, and the First Testament apparently assumes that Israel can still learn from these other religions. Many religious observances and concepts in Israel correspond to those of other Middle-Eastern peoples, and for that matter to those of traditional religions elsewhere. Parallels with traditional religions remind us that at a number of points Israelite and other religions developed independently in parallel ways. Since priesthood and sacrifice are common human institutions we need not imagine Israel "borrowing" these ideas from Canaan, though other cases apparently did involve adaptation from contemporary cultures. Perhaps it makes little

---

<sup>7</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, pp. 87-88.

theological difference which of these routes applies in different instances; in either way, God expects Israel to utilize human instincts in order to think of Yahweh and to worship Yahweh.

Thus the significance of the exodus is brought out by the reuse of motifs from Canaanite myth expressed in terms of a victory over Sea. The Mesha stone with its reference to “devoting” things by destroying them suggests that Israel’s theology and practice of war-making overlap with the pattern and theology of war elsewhere in Palestine. The wilderness sanctuary of Exod 25 – 40 follows Canaanite models for a dwelling of El, in its framework construction, its curtains embroidered with cherubim, and its throne flanked by cherubim. Such adapting continues with the building of the temple, the religion of the Psalter, and the ideology of kingship (divine and human). It continues in the oracles of the prophets, whose admission to the council of Yahweh is an admission to the council of El (cf. Ps 82) where they overhear El giving judgment, and in the visionary symbolism of the apocalypses. Occasional specific texts indicate concrete dependence (see Ps 104?). This is not to say that these institutions, ideas, or texts are unchanged when they feature within Yahwism, but that it was able to reach its own mature expression with their aid.

We have noted that the First Testament treats worship of El offered by Israelites and non-Israelites as worship of the true God. The story of Jonah presupposes that Yahweh alone is God, but it does not picture the Ninevites (or the sailors) consciously relating to Yahweh, as Jonah himself does. Yet their fasting and crying to God (‘*elohim*’) meets with a response from the one whom Jonah can call ‘*elohim*’, Yahweh, and El.

Indeed, Deuteronomy suggests that worship of other deities by non-Israelites is ordained by God (see Deut 4:19; cf. 32:8-9).<sup>8</sup> This may be an example of the way the First Testament attributes to Yahweh as sole cause phenomena that we tend to attribute to secondary human volition, as it does, for example, in some cases of human lying, or disobedience, or hardening of the heart. If Israelites observed that other nations worshiped their own deities, and if Yahweh was sovereign high God over all, then Yahweh must in some way be responsible for the fact. However, seeing Yahweh as bearing responsibility for all events still leaves a theological question unresolved (and cf. Ezek 20:25?). There remains a tension between the stance of these Deuteronomic texts and the expectation commonly expressed in the Psalms that all peoples should or will come to acknowledge Yahweh as Lord of the whole world. Perhaps the first is an interim acceptance, while the second is God’s ultimate purpose.

Such interim acceptance has to be interpreted, however, in the light of the later fuller awareness of the inadequacy of such religion. The Bible does not hint that in finally coming to acknowledge Yahweh, these peoples’ own religion finds its fulfillment. Rather, the acknowledgment of Yahweh exposes the inadequacy of any earlier religious understandings. Once the fullness of Yahweh’s self-revelation is earthed in Israel, the way is open to a critique of other gods and religions, and to the expectation that one day all peoples will acknowledge that truth and salvation are to be found in Yahweh alone. They will then either join Israel in worshiping and obeying Yahweh, or face a destiny of judgment and destruction. The progress of history thus

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., NRSV and TNIV mg, following the Qumran ms and LXX.

does change things. Joshua's renewal of the covenant (Josh 24) implies that, whatever kinds of polytheistic worship may have been part of Israel's ancestry, polytheism was no longer appropriate in light of Yahweh's great redemptive achievements in relation to Israel. Fresh choices had to be made "today." This seems consistent with Paul's affirmation of God's apparently differential attitude to human religion at different stages of either history or awareness, in Acts 17:27-31. The knowledge of Christ requires repentance even from things God had previously overlooked.

On the other hand, the First Testament does not explicitly base its condemnations of other peoples on the grounds that they believe in the wrong gods. Condemnation of the nations, where reasons are given, is usually based on their moral and social behavior (see the pronouncements about the nations, e.g., Amos 1 - 2; Isa 13 - 23). Condemnation of religious deficiency is reserved for the people of God (cf. Amos 2). The gods of the nations are regarded as simply impotent. Worship of them is not so much culpable as futile. They cannot save. So, whether Jonah's sailors or the Ninevites pray to Yahweh consciously or to whomever they recognize as God, it is Yahweh who saves them. The whole point of much of the mockery of other gods, by Elijah, but even more so in Isa 40 - 55, is that when the crunch comes, they are ridiculously powerless to save. Worse, they are an encumbrance to their worshipers. It is Yahweh alone who saves.

Deuteronomy 32 not merely allocates the worship of other deities to the different peoples. Yahweh allocates the peoples to these deities. These are not merely figments of the peoples' imagination. They are actual entities under Yahweh's sovereignty. Admittedly they do not always submit to that sovereignty (cf. Ps 82). Further, whether they do so or not, they have no power of their own; they are merely Yahweh's underlings.

In First Testament terms, then, the question whether there is salvation in other religions is a non-question. There is salvation in no religion because religions do not save. Not even Israel's religion saved them. It was at best a response to Yahweh, the living God who had saved them. And only this God can save. When the nations come over to Israel, in the prophet's vision, it will not be to say, "Now we realize that your religion is the best one," but to acknowledge, "In Yahweh alone is salvation" (Isa 45:14, 24). When people such as Jethro or Rahab come to acknowledge Yahweh, it is on the basis of a realization that the story they have been told about Yahweh demonstrates this. It would be an exaggeration to say that First Testament faith was not ethnic; it was to an ethnic group that Yahweh reached out. But belonging to the right ethnic group was not enough; the members of this ethnic group needed to make their response to Yahweh. And not belonging to this ethnic group was no bar to making its story one's own and thus being adopted into it.

On the part of Israelites themselves the First Testament rejects worship of any deity alongside the true God (e.g., Exod 20:3). Their confession is, "Yahweh our God Yahweh one" (Deut 6:4): Yahweh is the object of their entire commitment. The worship of El need not contravene this commitment because it is a form of worship of Yahweh. The worship of deities distinguishable from Yahweh does contravene it.

We might then regard adherence to (for instance) an African traditional religion as a God-given starting point for people on their way to

recognizing that the definitive acts of God are found in the story of Israel that comes to a climax in Jesus. It might be possible to take the same stance in relation to a religion such as Islam or to British folk-religion or to American new age religion, though here the question is complicated by the fact that these are at least in a formal sense post-Christian religions that explicitly or implicitly presuppose a conscious rejection of the gospel.

#### 4 Perspectives from Life in the Land: The Shortcomings of Baal Religion

While the First Testament can be implicitly open to other peoples' understandings of deity, it is by no means consistently so. There is a conflictual dimension to its view of other religions, which also needs to be seen in its context. While Joseph and the Pharaoh of his day presuppose that they serve the same God, the Pharaoh of Moses' day has notoriously forgotten Joseph and refuses to acknowledge the God of Israel. Thus while Moses can accept the identification of Yahweh and El, he must represent the opposition of Yahweh to the Egyptian gods served by Pharaoh. The exodus signifies the former's victory over and judgment on the latter (see Exod 12:12). The basis for Yahweh's action here is both a commitment to the descendants of Abraham and a commitment to compassion; Pharaoh and his gods are opposed to both. A major sub-plot of the exodus narrative seeks to show the stages by which Pharaoh is forced to acknowledge Yahweh (the train of thought runs through Exod 5:2, 7:5, 17, 8:10, 22, 9:16, 30; 14:18, 25). No matter how positively we view the openness to other people's experience and worship of God, there are circumstances that demand a conflictual stance. In this case it was because of rival claims to deity, resistance to God's redemptive work in history, and manifest, unrepentant oppression and injustice.

The worship of Baal (who apparently displaced El as the most prominent god among Israel's neighbors) and of other gods and goddesses also has a different status within the First Testament from the worship of El. Admittedly there are hints that at certain stages Yahweh could have been worshiped under the name Baal. Baal is an ordinary noun meaning "owner" and could have been used, like *'adon* ("master"), to acknowledge the authority of Yahweh (cf. Hos 2:16 [18]). Behind the biblical text there may be what F. M. Cross calls a conflation of El and Baal in the person of Yahweh.<sup>9</sup> In the First Testament itself, however, the worship of Yahweh utilizing the word Baal is never accepted. Even a name such as Esh-baal (man of Baal; 1 Chr 8:33) is altered to Ishbosheth (man of shame; 2 Sam 2:8). Baal religion is seen as a negative influence on Israelite religion. Baal sanctuaries are to be destroyed rather than adapted (Deut 7 and 12). The Baalistic influence on Israel's religion introduced by Solomon is a perversion. Thus worship of God as El is affirmed, worship of God as Baal is repudiated. Israel does not have to choose between Yahweh and El, but does have to choose between Yahweh and Baal (1 Kings 18:21; cf. Josh 24:14-15).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> I refer here and elsewhere in this paper to the First Testament's own stance to such questions. Both the biblical text and archeological discoveries suggest that in its practice Israelite religion was much more open-minded.



The First Testament is not explicit on the basis for this contrast in attitudes to the religion of El and that of Baal. Perhaps the high god El could more easily become the sole God Yahweh than the subordinate Baal could; worship of Baal implied worship of other gods than Yahweh, rather than worship of Yahweh as Baal. The historical power of El was that shown in Israel's key experiences of exodus from Egypt and conquest of Palestine, even if the nature of El, not least as one failing to exercise real control in heaven, would need redefining in the light of those experiences. Baal, too, is involved with war, but his additional involvement with fertility might make it more important for Yahweh to be distanced from Baal lest questions of fertility become too important within Yahwism and lest the way they are approached within Baalism affects Yahwism. Israel's history recalled the way Baal worship led the wilderness generation into sexual immorality (Num 25:13), and Hosea attacks the way Israel let itself be influenced by this aspect of Canaanite religion. Yet the nature of Yahweh also gained in definition under the influence of Baalism as Yahweh was more explicitly declared to be lord of the crops and was portrayed as Israel's own lover. In coming to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in marriage terms, Hosea thus adopts language and imagery from Canaan even while attacking the theology that the Canaanites expressed by means of it.<sup>11</sup>

If we reflect on the contexts in which the conflict between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt and the Baals of Canaan is characteristically presented, it becomes clear that it had a moral dimension that provides some help for our own evaluation of human religions and cultures.

The presenting cause of Yahweh's hostility to Pharaoh (god himself and representative of the gods of Egypt) is his oppression of the Hebrews. There is no such conflict and hostility in the narratives of Genesis when first Joseph and then his brothers have their long interaction with Egypt. On the contrary, there is a recognition of the God of Joseph by the then Pharaoh (e.g., Gen 41) in a way echoed later in Daniel. But the exodus Pharaoh, having initiated a state policy of oppression that has political, economic, social, and spiritual aspects, refuses to acknowledge the God of Moses (Exod 5:2). It is this that arouses Yahweh to action – faithful action in the biblical sense of acting against the oppressor and rescuing the oppressed. The destruction of Pharaoh is thus a declaration of Yahweh's opposition to a religion that sanctions a social order that in turn sanctions inhumanity and oppression.

The more protracted struggle with Baalism lasting from the very emergence of Israel in Canaan through the ministries of all the pre-exilic prophets has similar features. From the specific condemnations of it in the Torah (e.g., Lev 18; 20; Deut 7) to its characterization in prophetic material such as Hosea and Jeremiah, it can be seen to have included practices that were degrading or destructive or both, such as sexual rites and child sacrifice, as well as occult arts. The First Testament implicitly argues that these were prevalent at the time of Israel's emergence in Canaan in a way that had not been the case in the era of Israel's ancestors. The less conflictual attitude to Canaanite religion in Genesis goes along with the

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* (London: CIO, 1984), § 28. See also D. Senior and C. Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM, 1983), chs 1-5.

statement that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full” (Gen 15:16), whereas the wrongdoing of the later inhabitants of the land is enough to make the land itself vomit them out (Lev 18:24-28).

In other words, we can discern again a differential response to other religions related to the kind of social and moral characteristics they foster among their adherents.<sup>12</sup> What Elijah (and Yahweh) so vehemently opposed was not merely the worship of the wrong God (or rather of a no-god), as focused on Mount Carmel, but the hijacking of the whole social, economic and legal ethos of Israel by the religious vandalism of Jezebel’s Phoenician Baalism, as focused in the Naboth incident (1 Kings 21). The struggle was not simply over what was the right religion, but over what was a right and just society for Naboth to live in. Baal religion undergirded, or at least imposed no restraint on, the way Ahab and Jezebel treated Naboth. It could be argued, therefore, that the moral, social, and cultural effects of a major religious tradition do give us some grounds for a discriminating response to it, though this can be as uncomfortable an argument for Christianity as a cultural religion as for any other.

We have noted that the First Testament is ambivalent about Israel’s own means of worship. Sacrifice and temple are accepted, along with monarchy and priesthood, as human instincts rather than originally divine initiatives. But women priests are not accepted, and neither is worship by means of an image of God. This last is a distinctive important feature of the religion of the First Testament. In popular Christian thinking the reason for prohibiting images has been the essentially non-physical nature of God, but the First Testament does not make this point, and arguably both the idea of humanity’s being in God’s image and the idea of incarnation are difficult to reconcile with it. The Decalogue juxtaposes and interweaves the prohibition on worshipping Yahweh by means of an image with the prohibition on worshipping other gods, and it may imply the conviction that the one easily slides into the other: an image could as easily be of Yahweh or of Baal, so we will be wise to avoid images as part of avoiding Baalism. The argument of Deut 4 is that a silent, static image cannot represent the essentially dynamic speaking and acting nature of Yahweh, and this fits the polemic of Isa 44 and 46 against both domestic images and national images. But 2 Sam 7 uses parallel arguments against the building of a temple and then allows it. Christian history certainly illustrates the way images can be a snare, but the Orthodox icon tradition also illustrates how they can be a means of true worship.

Perhaps openness to the influence of other religions can be an enrichment or a perversion according to whether it allows a religion to come to full flowering as Yahweh’s nature is more clearly grasped and Yahweh’s lordship more fully acknowledged, or whether it turns it into something other than itself and leads to the ignoring of Yahweh’s nature and expectations. But we have to come to terms with the fact that we do not

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the discussion of this point in C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983) = *An Eye for an Eye* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983), ch. 8; also “The Authority of Scripture in an Age of Relativism: Old Testament Perspectives,” in M. Eden and D. F. Wells (ed.), *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott* (Leicester: IVP 1991), pp. 31-48; and now *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester/Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

know the rationale for a number of God's requirements of Israel in religious affairs and that a number of these requirements may be culture-relative and/or arbitrary. In deciding about the adapting or avoiding of different humanly-devised forms of worship, it seems likely that a significant part is played by tactical considerations regarding what may do more harm than good. Another factor often underlying Yahweh's requirements of Israel is simply the desire that they should look and behave differently, as a means of advertising to them and to other peoples that they are different in the sense of having a distinctive place in God's purpose. The Cornelius story marks the termination of the period when God operates by this principle, though the new period it introduces is not one in which differences between one religion and another can now be ignored but rather one in which they can now be confronted rather than avoided.

## 5 Perspectives from the Babylonian and Persian Periods: The Interrelation of "Universalism" and "Exclusivism"

The stances taken in the literature that relates to the Babylonian and Persian periods offer further pointers regarding the contextual nature of attitudes to other religions and their adherents. Prophecies in Isa 40 – 55 take a polemical stance over against the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo, the equivalents of El and Baal. Either Yahweh is God, or they are gods; the possibility of seeing Bel as the name under which the Babylonians worship the one God is not entertained. Yahweh alone is creator, Yahweh alone rules in heaven, Yahweh alone acts in world events, Yahweh alone reveals the significance of those events (see Isa 40:12-26; 41:1-7, 21-9; 42:5-9; 46; and cf. Jer 10). Babylon and its religion will be put down. The affirmation that Yahweh creates both light and darkness and is responsible for both prosperity and disaster (Isa 45:7) perhaps sets itself over against the dualism of other religions.

In its mono-Yahwism and its affirmation of Yahweh's commitment to Israel, Isa 40 – 55 might be seen as the most exclusivist and nationalist section of the First Testament. Yet alongside this aspect of its stance is a conviction that Yahweh's relationship with Israel is of significance for the whole world, a conviction that has often made these chapters seem the most universalist in the First Testament; the same two-stranded attitude continues in Isa 56 – 66. Perhaps one implication is that Yahweh offers people alternative scenarios: on the basis of what they see Yahweh doing with Israel the nations will come to acknowledge that Yahweh alone is God, but they choose whether they do so willingly and joyously or unwillingly and profitlessly.

In contrast to Isa 40 – 55, Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel identify Yahweh as the God of heaven, a title that other peoples within the Persian empire could give to their chief god (see Ezra 1:2; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh 1:4-5; 2:4, 20; Dan 2:18-19, 37, 44; in 5:23, "the Lord of heaven"). Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah are involved in the service of the Persian court, and like Joseph, Daniel and his friends accept a courtly education and foreign names, with their religious implications. At the same time Ezra and Nehemiah insist on keeping the people of Yahweh separate from the peoples around and their religions, while Daniel insists on the importance of Jews maintaining

their distinctive faithfulness to their God and their purity (Dan 1) and also their distinctive worship (Dan 3) and piety (Dan 6).

It is an oversimplification to suggest that the separatist strand to Ezra-Nehemiah characterizes the Second Temple period as a whole and contrasts with a more inclusive attitude earlier. We have noted that Ezra-Nehemiah is capable of expressing its theology with the help of the terms of the surrounding culture and religion, as Exodus and Hosea do. Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Hosea are separatist in a parallel sense to the one that applies to Ezra-Nehemiah. Isaiah 19 belongs among a number of passages in the prophets that are usually listed as especially inclusivist and that are usually dated during the Second Temple period. We have noted that Isa 40 – 55, often reckoned the universalist highpoint of the First Testament, includes the First Testament's most scathing treatment of other religions. The stance the First Testament takes to other religions apparently varies not only with the nature of the religion but also with the nature of the power and the pressure exercised by its adherents, but both openness and guardedness seem to feature in all contexts.<sup>13</sup>

## 6 Perspectives From the Greek Period: The Creativity of Exclusiveness

Similar considerations arise from the closing scene of the period covered by the First Testament, related in the visions in Daniel. Like Daniel (see Dan 5:23), the Syrian king, Antiochus, seems to have presupposed that Yahweh could be identified with "the Lord of Heaven," the Syrian high god. In some sense or in some periods one might have expected Jews to accept this assumption, but the visions in Daniel presuppose that the two are incompatible. To accede to the religious prescriptions of the king would be to abandon one's commitment to the God of Israel. Once more the First Testament suggests that there is a time or a case for openness to other religions and a time for recognizing that this risks the survival of Israelite religion and the Israelite people.

It is simplistic and misleading for the Anglican document *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* to say that it is "when Israel is most open to others that she is most creative" while "exclusiveness and isolation... have an impoverishing effect'.<sup>14</sup> Out of a context of "exclusiveness and isolation" Daniel is rather a creative book. The pluralistic context of Israel's life suggests that Israel's ways of relating to other religions ought to be a resource for us in a situation that is now more like post-exilic Israel's than the Western church has experienced for some time. But to affirm "openness not isolation"<sup>15</sup> is only to simplify down a characteristic scriptural dialectic in the opposite direction to the one that the report elsewhere deplores when it does not match its own instincts.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The often-quoted Mal 1:11 is of such uncertain significance it seems unwise to argue from it.

<sup>14</sup> *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* § 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* § 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* § 46. It is significantly ironic, too, that *Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue* is capable of what now seems a rather old-fashioned anti-Jewish tone in the way it downgrades Second Temple Judaism in order to commend the New Testament (see § 33, 35, 36).

## 7 The Narrative Nature of Biblical Faith

If other religions make a starting point in relating to God but not a finishing point, the fundamental reason lies in the nature of the gospel.

Now Maurice Wiles, for example, offers what he intends as an uncontroversial summary of the essential nature of the Christian faith in terms of convictions about the reality and nature of God (e.g., as love).<sup>17</sup> If one understands scriptural faith to focus on such eternal truths about God, then it may be difficult to identify the essential shortcoming in a religion. A religion may have a secure grasp of such truths. There are, after all, other ancient and modern religions that include belief in a God who is just and loving, creator, committed to one's own people, and who expects a response from people in prayer, worship, obedience, and concern for justice. Likewise, one may see the essential nature of Christian faith as involving profound religious experiences – a friend of mine thus speaks of (say) a U2 concert as “church.” If so, this will again suggest other criteria for comparing different faiths. In the First Testament, sacred institutions such as sacrifice, priesthood, monarchy, and temple are pictured as devised by human beings, harnessed with partial success to God's purpose, but inclined to contribute to the paganization of Israel. Some of these institutions may have distinctive theological meaning within Israelite religion, but it would be precarious to base the decisive significance of Israel's faith on its having features of such a kind.

The significance of Israelite religion does not lie in itself, or in the number of distinctive features we can chalk up for it in comparison with other religions (always a risky business, because parallels elsewhere then have a way of emerging). Israel's significance lay in its status as witness to the deeds of the living, active, saving God. This is the repeated thrust of Isa 40 – 55: written in the context of overbearing religious plurality, the prophet did not encourage Israel to compare its religion with the Babylonians' and feel superior, but directed their thoughts to the acts of Yahweh in its actual history and declared, “You are Yahweh's witnesses.”

The framework of First Testament faith, like that of New Testament faith, takes narrative form. It is a declaration about things God has done. It is good news, not a good idea. It states that in the history of Israel and of Jesus, God has acted in love to restore humanity to God and to its destiny. The gospel is the news that God created the world, stayed involved with it when it went wrong, became involved with Israel in order to put it right, commissioned God's son to become a Jew himself, let him die, and raised him to a transformed life. Christian faith involves the conviction that this story offers the central key to relating to God and to what it means to be human.

It is the narrative nature of this gospel that binds together the First Testament and the New Testament and gives the First Testament a distinctive place in relation to the Christian gospel. In this sense there cannot be “other First Testaments” for people with a background in other religions. There is a distinctive sense in which Jesus came as the climax to the story of Israel. This is not to imply that God was simply absent from these other people's stories. Walter Moberly speaks of the story of Israel's

---

<sup>17</sup> M. Wiles, *Explorations in Theology* 4 (London, SCM 1979), p. 61.

ancestors as “the Old Testament of the Old Testament”; it leads into Israel’s story as Israel’s story leads into the story of Jesus and the church.<sup>18</sup> One might then see Gen 1 – 11 as “the Old Testament of the Old Testament of the Old Testament”; the story of the world leads into the story of Israel’s ancestors. And we might see the stories of other peoples and other religions as testimonies to God’s involvement with them and as declarations of the significance of their stories, analogous to the story of God’s involvement with the nations in Gen 1 – 11. But the First Testament itself is still *the* First Testament.

It is sometimes argued that translation is a fundamentally impossible enterprise. A mediating view on this question is the suggestion that narrative is fundamentally translatable in a way that many other genres are not. Poetry loses in translation, which means the wisdom books, the Psalms, and the prophets lose. Paul’s discursive theology also takes considerable translation, because it takes considerable interpretation; it is very dense because of its use of metaphor, and very contextual. But a story is another matter. Stories lose less in translation. There is then some irony in the fact that while Paul kept in touch with the narrative nature of the gospel, in their discursive theological work subsequent Church Fathers had a harder time doing so. One fateful development of their centuries was the reworking of the gospel into Greek terms, which is often called a translation into Greek concepts, but it was more than translation. The reworking involved the effective abandonment of the narrative dynamic of Christian faith.

It is as well that the principle of translatability applies especially to narrative, because of that fact that the Bible is dominated by narrative for the reason just suggested. This is not merely a statistical fact but one that reflects the nature of scriptural faith, as not a collection of concepts, even declarations such as “Yahweh is God” or “Jesus is Lord,” but a story, a piece of news, a gospel. The scriptural narrative becomes a gospel again when its implications are worked out in a context, as happens in different ways within scripture and then in many subsequent different contexts. Mother-tongue scriptures make the articulation of the gospel possible because they make it possible to work out how that narrative is gospel in a context. It would not be surprising if other religions possess narratives that illustrate the significance of the biblical narrative and illumine the nature of the gospel. They will thus bring blessing to people who share the gospel with people of this culture and make it possible for them as storytellers to respond to that gospel. But they are not the gospel story.

The process of contextualizing the gospel story may also lead to loss of understanding. The Christian church in the West learned to tell that story in a predominantly legal framework. God is judge, human wrongdoing is the breaking of the law, Jesus pays the legal penalty for sin, and that enables believers to be acquitted. This is only a marginally biblical framework for understanding the gospel. It came to be prominent in the Western Church in a particular cultural context, but then came to have a life of its own. In present Western culture such a legal way of looking at the relationship of God and humanity has less power than it had a millennium ago, but the church has a hard time escaping from this way of telling the scriptural story into a more relational way of explaining the gospel’s significance.

---

<sup>18</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

In a context of religious plurality, the nature of the gospel is worked out afresh as the biblical story is set alongside another religion's story, or its non-story nature. This means that the people who tell the story appreciate it afresh, as happens when a Ghanaian Christian comes to see Jesus as ancestor or elder brother. It also means that the people who hear the story for the first time see how the story is good news for them in their particularity. It is specifically the context of the biblical narrative that constitutes the context that readers enter in order to participate in its world of meaning and experience. I think I have heard it suggested that non-Western cultures have retained an awareness of the importance of narrative that modernity encouraged Western cultures to lose (in the rarified form in which one meets them in theology and philosophy). So communicating the gospel is aided by the fact that the gospel takes narrative form.

## 8 The Narrative Nature of Biblical Faith and Religious Dialogue

Awareness of the narrative nature of the gospel thus gives us a point of contact with people living in other religious contexts. But it also distances us from them, because it makes the claim that this narrative is of unique importance. This is so not because of its nature as revelation but because it tells of the key events that determine the way God relates to the world. As a matter of fact, God created the world as a place that was good and not half-finished, to contradict a common modern narrative. When humanity then flouted God's word, God determined to "carry" its wrongdoing (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word routinely translated "forgive"). God determined to put up with it, not to be put off by it, to pay the price for it in God's own being in order to keep the relationship going. God did that through Israel's story in a way that came to a climax in the cross, where God went so far as to let Jewish and Gentile humanity do the last thing it could possibly do by way of rejection, by putting God to death, and God carried that too, and thereby frustrated it. God declined to be overcome by it, in either sense of "overcome." God did not give up on the relationship, nor did God agree to stay dead. Jesus' resurrection and his appearing to his disciples is the indication that he declines both these.

This story is a revelation of the nature of God, but it is that because it is more fundamentally an account of something God did once-for-all. In other religions (as in Hollywood movies) there might be promises of this story, or prophecies of it, or metaphors for it, or even revelations of it, but there cannot be regular narratives of it, because these narratives need to come from the people who experienced these events and who in the scriptures give their testimony to them.

Religious plurality involves competing narratives. Israel's neighbors had very different narratives about the origin of the world from Israel's, and Gen 1, at least, seems to have been written to counter these by giving a very different narrative account of deity, the world, and humanity. The New Testament story is intolerant and exclusive in its claim that cross and resurrection are the final and effective expression of God's resistance to being overcome by humanity. The Holy Spirit may indeed be involved in enabling different peoples to perceive and respond to insights about God and about life in the context of many ways of living religiously, but all such

possible insights need to be brought into the context of the gospel expressed in the biblical narrative.

In the church in Southern California, for instance, at least in the Anglo-American church, I am particularly aware of two influential narratives. One is the narrative of “my individual spiritual journey.” A local church I know routinely welcomes people to worship “wherever you are on your journey of faith.” Individual students at Fuller Theological Seminary keep spiritual journals, implying the conviction that their journey matters. They have individual spiritual directors, guides on this journey. The other narrative is the story of the United States, its finding of its own freedom (July Fourth, Independence Day, is a very big event; it seems odd that the world’s great superpower should make such an issue of its independence) and its receiving a vocation from God to bring democracy to the world.

In relation to the first of these narratives, the church assumes that I and my personal relationship with God is the key to understanding the significance of Christian faith, not noticing that if this were so, one would expect the Bible to be more like a book on spirituality. In relation to the second narrative, the church often accepts the identification of church and nation that is a paradoxical feature of the United States. It formally keeps church and state separate but substantially intertwines them in a way that does not obtain in countries where there is still a church-state connection but where church and culture are more overtly separate.

So churches commonly affirm one or other or both of those two narratives and do not set them in the context of the gospel narrative to let it test them, broaden them or refute them. Our situation is thus rather similar to that which obtains in the First Testament story. There, one way of describing the dynamic of Israelite religion as (for instance) Jeremiah sees it would be to say that the Canaanites’ narrative, expressed (for instance) in the stories of Baal and Anat, often influenced Israel more than the story of the exodus and Sinai. Israel did not consciously abandon this story, but it lived as if the true story was that other one with its direct potential for understanding the crucial processes whereby the crops grew each year.

Instead, we are called to invite people to tell their story and then see how that illumines the gospel and how the gospel illumines it, sets it in a new context, and relativizes it. It is when another narrative threatens to overwhelm the scriptural narrative that we must stand against it. It is then that it becomes demonic.

Both the First Testament and the New Testament are exclusivist in the sense that they believe in the supreme importance of the history that begins with the promise to Israel’s ancestors and the exodus. Both are universalist in the sense that they believe that this history is designed to embrace all peoples; its benefits are not simply for Israel or the church. Thus a passage such as Isa 2:2-4 shares God’s dream that at the End all peoples will come to learn from Yahweh in Jerusalem. The situation in Gen 1 – 2 is more than restored.

The shortcoming of other religions is that they cannot and thus do not focus on this story. Humanity’s problem was not merely lack of knowledge concerning the nature of God and humanity but the need for a restoration of the relationship between these two so that humanity may realize its destiny. We needed redemption, not merely revelation. Whatever insight other



religions may have on the nature of God and humanity, they lack the key to the restoration of the relationship and the realization of the destiny, because this lies in what God did in Israel and in Christ. Biblical religion is not primarily another set of religious teachings about God but a witness to what God did to save creation. That witness does generate insights about God and creation, some of which are so fundamental to the reality of “the way things are” that they are held in common with the religious understandings of other groups of human beings made in God’s image. But merely listing the common beliefs between biblical faith and other religions (like drawing parallels between movies and the gospel) does not dissolve the significance of the Bible as witness to the unique events by which God has acted to restore creation.<sup>19</sup>

Claiming to be witnesses to the one sequence of deeds whereby God acted to redeem the world inevitably smacks of arrogance, as well as being unpostmodern. We can only ask people to look in the direction we are pointing and make their judgment *a posteriori*, not *a priori*. Our problem then will be that the Christian religion has also often proved itself incapable of encompassing the gospel or reflecting it, so that the response of someone who belongs to another religion can understandably be that even if Christianity has rightly diagnosed the human problem, it has still not identified the solution.

In his book *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*,<sup>20</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson notes that there are “exclusivist” and “open” strands within the First Testament’s attitude to other religions and cultures. He sees the New Testament as taking up the first rather than the second, regrets that modern Christian mission has followed (partly through its involvement with imperialist expansionism), and argues for the opposite stance. I have argued that there are good theological reasons why the First Testament has both exclusivist and open strands, and that we should follow.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. R. R. De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.